

Mental health

'Every day is a battle': portraits of US veterans capture hidden toll of PTSD

The subjects of [Susan J Barron's](#) intimate black-and-white portraits provide an emotional gut punch and seek to highlight an often ignored condition



For Sgt Russell Carter, the first sign that something was wrong came when he was still serving in Afghanistan and the sound of friendly aircraft overhead sent him diving under a truck for cover.

For Specialist Craig McNabb, his flashbacks took him to the days he was surrounded by death as an army military police officer, filling and stacking body bags at the World Trade Center after the 9/11 terror attack.

“I’d see all the bodies in my head,” he said. “Then I was deployed to war.”

For Cpl Derek Butler, after returning from Iraq, sleep became terrifying because of the recurring nightmare about an ambush when his buddy was shot in the neck and took three minutes to bleed out and die in his lap.

“It took my first suicide attempt to get a diagnosis: PTSD,” Butler said. “Back then the invisible wounds of war weren’t really thought of. It was easier to get help for something you can see.”

The three military veterans who have all suffered with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are far from alone. [According to a US Veterans Affairs study](#), 15.7% of those who served in Afghanistan and Iraq screened positive for PTSD.



Artist Susan J Barron first became aware of the scale of the issue when she was part of a project delivering school supplies to families on military bases.

“I was talking to women who said ‘our husbands are coming back and they look fine and then they are killing themselves’. I found it really hard to believe,” she said.

The **latest VA figures** show more than 6,000 veterans killed themselves each year between 2008 and 2016 - at a rate of more than 16 per day - and the study noted that in 2016 suicide had “increased substantially” in the 18-34 age group.

Barron has captured the hidden toll in a new portrait series *Depicting The Invisible*, a set of 6ft-by-6ft canvases of veterans with PTSD, which provide an emotional gut punch for viewers.

At first sight, the subjects of her intimate black and white portraits, all of them making eye contact, look tough and confident.

But swirling around them like an enveloping fog, are collage images of conflict, black and grey abstracted paint which mimics a dark camouflage and the distinctive black clusters which show up on the brain scans of people with PTSD. And then, in their own words, are the memories and experiences that have haunted them.

“They keep telling me they have these movies, these images that run in their heads and they can’t stop. I wanted to find a way to represent that, send them spinning all around them,” Barron said.

“The thing I learned about PTSD that I didn’t know before is every day is a battle, there’s no cure. Some talk about the fact they would rather have a devastating physical injury than this.”



But there are also moments of optimism. Butler has a service dog, a pitbull called Jupiter who wakes him from his nightmares, distracts him, and keeps people at bay by circling him if Butler is out in a crowd and feeling anxious. “When he was a puppy he was set on fire. We found each other,” Butler’s own words on the canvas end.

McNabb has become a mentor for others with PTSD, trained to talk them back from suicide.

“Rusty” Carter gets around in a powered wheelchair, today, a quadriplegic paralysed from the chest down.

His first injury in Afghanistan happened in a friendly fire incident when a 500lb US bomb dropped near him during an eight-hour gun battle. After recovering from those injuries he had his first experience of PTSD. “Every time I heard a fly overhead I was jumping for cover, it would have me diving under trucks and rolling underneath of it not sure if a bomb was dropping down on top of me.

“It takes over, almost a muscle memory thing. Something triggers, that’s how uncontrollable it is.”

Months later, the truck he was in went off a bridge in Afghanistan on 2 January 2011, and he woke up a week later back in the US at the Walter Reed military hospital in Washington DC.



“I woke up and I’m surrounded by my family, I had tubes down my throat and I can’t speak and my immediate thought was ‘Holy shit, they captured me, how did they get my family too?’ That contributed to my PTSD a lot at the beginning.”

Carter is 30 now, lives in Pennsylvania with his parents and brother, in a private addition at the back of their home. He plays pool twice a week in a league, made it to the national wheelchair championships, and is an avid Philadelphia Eagles fan.

When he looks back at his time in the army, he says he feels great pride. “The number one feeling, I’m very proud. If I could walk again today, I’d be back over there again tomorrow.”

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He remains convinced more must be done to support veterans with PTSD. And he is concerned with the way the VA handed out opioids and anti-depressants.

“I have friends who started with opiates and moved to heroin and then OD’d on heroin ... some of them committed suicide after having been hooked on that stuff for a while. We lost more from my unit at home than we did out there.”

Barron has already taken the exhibition to New York and Miami and plans to bring it to Washington DC and San Diego in 2019 to keep highlighting an often ignored condition.

“Historically, returning soldiers were told it was ‘weak’ to talk about what they had seen, but we need to talk about it because what’s happening is just unacceptable,” she said.

There is one more distressing footnote to the work. When the exhibition was first staged there was a final canvas, still protected by bubble wrap, left in a storage area of the HG Contemporary Gallery in New York. It depicted Damon Zeigler, a staff sergeant in the US marines, who had been a mentor to other veterans with PTSD.

He took his own life a few months earlier and his family had asked for his portrait not to be exhibited.

“He was such a high-level thinker,” Barron said. “He talked about searching for healing in yoga and Buddhism. The fact that someone as proactive, who embraced life, could succumb to PTSD was really a reality check, just devastating.”

● A limited edition art book [Depicting The Invisible](#) is available now, all proceeds going to the [Freedom Fighters Outdoors](#) organisation helping veterans with PTSD.

In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. In the UK, Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international suicide helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org.